

An Elephant in the Desert

Vidya Sarveswaran

Today is Ganesh Chaturthi in India. A time of the year when there is a languid close to the warm summer and the whole country relishes the post-rain petrichor of lazy afternoons. It is this season that celebrates the birthday of the elephant-faced boy God, which is also one of the biggest Hindu festivals of India. Ganesha's childlike wonder, his voracious appetite and love for good food, his pot belly and astute wisdom are perhaps some of the things that make him the most endearing of the Hindu Pantheon. He is the universal master of ceremonies, the remover of obstacles and the initiator of new beginnings....

A Fruit and a Legend:

Saint Narada once visited Mount Kailash in the Himalayas, the abode of Lord Shiva and his consort Goddess Shakti. He handed over a mango to Shiva and Shakti. The mango, they were told, was very special. Whoever consumed the fruit would be blessed with eternal wisdom. But the tricky part was that the fruit could not be shared, and had to be consumed fully by one person. Shiva and Shakti were caught in a dilemma, because they had two children, Ganesha and Karthikeya.

Narada's clever intervention provided a plausible solution. He said the fruit could be given to the one who first succeeds in going around the world thrice. Shiva and Shakti consented to the suggestion. Karthikeya mounted his splendid peacock in order to accomplish his mission. Ganesha on the other hand simply circumambulated his parents thrice, and requested that the fruit to be given to him. When asked for an explanation, Ganesha replied that his parents and his mountain home of Kailash were his world, and that any other world outside of this was unthinkable to him.

The simple tale evolves into a universal cultural metaphor, where the mango becomes a symbol of self-awareness, and can be cherished only when one remains centered and connected to the Universe. Shiva and Shakti represent the Universe. Shiva symbolizes the Purusha, the male principle and consciousness, and Shakti stands for Prakriti, the creative energy and joie de vivre of Mother Nature.

An inward turned mind like that of Ganesha, which is in constant communion with the Universe, is that which is capable of redefining a more authentic sense of home, and also our understanding of it. This abiding, archetypal Hindu myth, suggests both out of the box thinking and sustainability.

It shows a more ancient understanding of the "imagination's vital role in the making of the world" (Handley 2012) and helps us in sustaining our deep organic connections with our community. Ganesha's approach is both creative and alternative; it showcases an ecological imagination that encourages one to reconsider our relationship with the universe.

The Coyote is the Elephant

"Members of the Coyote Clan are not easily identified, but there are clues. You can see it in their eyes. They understand the earth re-creates itself day after day" (Williams 1994, 19).

My initial meeting with Terry was an unconfirmed one, to be held in Wyoming in early January. I received a call from Terry's secretary, who informed me that the meeting would happen at another time and that there was a change of venue. I was alone in the US away from family and friends, rediscovering the contours of life. This sudden change of schedule was disconcerting. Finally, after a long wait, Terry agreed to meet me in Salt Lake City, Utah.

"You are going to Utah?! Good Luck! This is the season of snow storms, you know...you could just be snowed in for days." Many optimistic voices bellowed at me in haste. I was scared and anxious. My flight between Liberty International and SLC International was over five hours and I was flying to a different time zone for the first time. Why was I even doing all of this? I mentally offered a prayer to Ganesha....

Somewhere on that flight, the arduous journey turned into a quiet and reflective one. Sometimes our lives are full of these moments. The air hostess was busy with her round of beer refills. As I watched a beer bubble break, I realized that it may be that not everything is a matter of choice. A few things, like one's parents, country, passion and ideals are like love and compassion. They are not acts of volition. Sometimes you do things because you must, because there is no other way to do them. I think I grew up a little that day, somewhere flying towards the Moab desert.

Florence Krall Shepard was the only other person I knew in Utah, besides Terry. Flo was Terry's professor at the University of Utah. Florence and I had a friend in common who introduced us to teach other. A Professor Emeritus at the University of Utah, she was to be my lens through which I would see Utah. As I landed in the Salt Lake City International airport, there she was...this grand lady nearly eighty five, a bundle of enthusiasm and an infectious smile. That warmth melted all of the impending snowstorms I was carrying within me. Lunch felt a bit Thoreauvian when we spoke at length about Paul Shepard – the renowned environmentalist (and Flo's husband), Flo's log cabin in Wyoming, her work as an environmentalist and a book that she was trying to finish. Incidentally, as Terry was Flo's student, Flo shared her experiences with me as Terry's teacher. After driving me to the Mormon temple, Flo saw me off at the guest house, where I settled in for the night before I was to meet Terry.

I slept little that night. I kept rehearsing all the questions that I was going to ask Terry the next day. I had worked on her writing for nearly three years now. That morning was filled with moments of ambivalence. I was both hyper-excited and terrified. I was waiting outside Terry's office with bated breath.

Suddenly, a gentle voice called out my name and there she was! The first thing that one notices about Terry is a magnetic presence and an inexplicable depth, even when you have not yet begun your conversation with her. We completely connected with each-other. That instant, I felt I had known Terry all my life. There were several moments during the meeting, when there were deep silences. To me, these quiet spaces between dialogues helped me bond totally with Terry. "Terry, you know I am really nervous about talking to you," I said. "You know what Vidya, I AM REALLY nervous about talking to YOU, because you have such an excellent understanding of my works...more than I do perhaps," and we both giggled.

Before the formal interview began, Terry and I walked a shared labyrinth. For me, the walk itself was a treasured one and I view it as a metaphor for the sacred spaces within oneself that Terry so passionately talks about in her writings. In the interview we discussed issues ranging from the personal to the political to the sacred. Terry's openness to life, and to other cultures, her warmth, enthusiasm and refreshing idealism are a few things that I brought back home with me.

Terry spoke about her grandmother Mimi, her mother, Paul and Flo Shepard, Ted Major and Wangari Mathai as some of her most influential teachers I connections.

We went on to speak about the strong sense of oneness, the deep sense of introspection, harmony, celebration, and the affirmation of all beings that forms the crux of her writings. I asked Terry if she saw herself as a deep ecologist. Terry said, "I do not identify with the intellectual discourse of the genre. My affinity is more with the land itself. The animals and an ecological state of mind like native people. Even among religions the early tenets of religion say that the world was created in spirit before it was actualized and all beings have a spirit and a spiritual presence on earth. Do you think I am a deep ecologist?"

Grief, death and forgiveness were a significant part of the discussion. With Terry, one could feel that she was genuinely interested in the human condition and there was a deep sense of care and empathy in her voice. "In many ways, writing for me is a spiritual practice. Whenever, I sit down to write, I light a candle. It says to me that now we are in sacred space outside of normal time." Her books reflect her own spiritual path. The act of writing, for her, is a spiritual act that helps her to be fully present, despite the anxieties of life, and to stay connected to the Universe.

The conversation inevitably turned to her own reflective activism and her particular interest in non-violent social activism. Terry spoke of Mahatma Gandhi with deep reverence, and how she simply loved his gestures. His spinning of cotton that was not British, the Salt March, and how he engaged with society. Gandhi's compassionate leadership, the fierceness of his character and yet, the largeness of his heart touched her in many ways.

We were taking a breather, when Terry suddenly asked me, “Vidya, do you know that I keep dreaming of the elephant God? Can you tell me a little about him?” Strangely enough, I had brought a little soap stone statuette of baby Ganesha as a gift for her new office.

We then spoke at length about myths and legends, and of how stories enact our life patterns, connect us to the physical world around us, and teach us stewardship. We spoke about how every piece of writing is regional, personal, and at the same time universal. The specificities of nature of the Great Salt Lake, the Coyote, the Sage and the Rabbit Brush are as real as the Tulsi (Sacred Basil) the Mango, the Peacock and the Elephant. By creating that kind of specificity, the ideas that may be universal are not abstracted, but are grounded in real time and space. We spoke about how when one reads a legend from Utah, there is some correlation to a legend from Madras. This is perhaps because both the elephant and the coyote are interchangeable. There is really no difference between one or the other. There “is no gulf, forbidding to the imagination, between the city and the forest, between heaven and earth, land and sea, or between human language and the world” (Handley 2012).

Before we parted for the day, Terry said she had to show me a very special and sacred place. We drove to where her mother was buried. While I quietly placed the bunch of golden-yellow gerberas that I was carrying with me, both Terry and I could not help crying...and the peace and silence was dense in the air.

When I left, Terry quickly slipped a beautiful silver Hopi bracelet onto my wrist and said, “From one writer to another”. From Terry I also learnt “that in between two covers of a book, between the craft and questioning, there is a stillness in the text that creates a sense of listening...these books are an extended meditation...it is through this deep listening to our own hearts, to the hearts of others and to the mind itself, that we can create an ecological understanding beyond ourselves.”

The single golden gerbera that I brought back with me remains pressed within the spine of a book signed for me by Terry, nods in unison.

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